

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 522

RC 016 074

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TITLE Exploration of an Ambiguous Culture: Conflicts Facing Gifted Females in Rural Environments.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Bellingham, WA, October 9, 1986).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Androgyny; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Females; *Gifted; *Role Conflict; *Rural Education; *Rural Environment; Rural Urban Differences; Sex Bias; Sex Differences; Sex Role; Social Values; Student Adjustment; *Student Needs; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS Rural Women

ABSTRACT

The educational and social requirements of gifted females in rural areas are not only different from those of gifted females in urban settings but are significantly different from the educational and social requirements of their male peers. On the one hand, girls are encouraged to pursue academic and/or professional opportunities usually available and ultimately achieved only by leaving their communities. On the other hand, those goals are the antithesis of what is prized in rural life--the maintenance of a stable and conservative educational, religious, and social life. Gifted females are caught in a conflict of values between expectations for those who are bright and promising and expectations that females will undergird the status quo. The generic admonitions characterizing gifted education must be analyzed and restructured for implementation in geographically isolated communities, and the inherent value structures of those communities must be respected and understood. Rural educators must be certain that school practices do not promote sex stereotypes. They should capitalize on the strengths of rural youth and be sensitive to the values of rural life. Thirty-four references are included. (JHZ)

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ED278522

Exploration of an Ambiguous Culture: Conflicts facing
Gifted Females
in Rural Environments

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Presented at the annual conference of the National Rural and
Small Schools Consortium, Bellingham, WA, October, 1986.

RC016074

key identifiers: female, gifted, rural

Abstract

Bright, capable females in rural or geographically isolated areas face a paradox. On the one hand, they are encouraged to pursue academic and or professional opportunities usually available and ultimately achieved only by leaving their communities. On the other hand, those goals are the antithesis of what is prized in rural America. This paper highlights issues and concerns for school counselors, teachers, and administrators. Specific strategies are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

The identification of children and youth for participation in special learning opportunities categorized as gifted education presents a paradox for female students in rural environments. On the one hand, girls are encouraged to pursue academic and/or professional opportunities usually available and ultimately achieved only by leaving their communities. On the other hand, those goals are the very antithesis of what is prized in rural America: the maintenance of a stable and conservative educational, religious, and social life. For bright females, what begins as an ambiguous message becomes a dilemma of almost staggering proportions. The conflict is primarily one of values--expectations for those who are bright and promising versus expectations for females to undergird the status quo. Gifted education, particularly if its focus is generalized, often contributes to the conflict.

Presented here is the hypothesis that educational and social requirements of gifted, rural females are not only different from those of gifted females in urban settings, they are significantly different from the educational and social requirements of their male peers. Necessarily, generic admonitions characterizing gifted education must be analyzed and restructured for implementation in geographically isolated communities where inherent value structures must be respected and understood.

GENERIC ADVOCACY OF GIFTED PROGRAMMING

A review of the literature reveals that advocacy of the gifted is indeed a blanket or generic mission (Bradley, 1983; DeLeon & VandenBos 1985; Dubner, 1984; Gallagher, 1983; Ginsberg, 1984; Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977; Mitchell, 1981; Steinbach, 1981). There is little, if any, specific advocacy information for parents or educators of gifted minority group children (Asian American, black, hispanic, Native American), let alone female members of minority groups. This might underscore the point that an anti-elitist attitude toward gifted education, as pointed out by James Gallagher, in A Model of Advocacy for Gifted Education (1983), is a contributing factor. Since gifted education is not a priority of American education or society, promoters avoid weakening those efforts by creating even smaller subgroups with substantially less political clout.

While demonstrating political savvy, that position will serve neither gifted females in general nor gifted females in rural educational settings. Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis (1986) found that girls, despite aptitude, often fail to persevere in subjects like math which is perceived to be part of a male domain. According to Eccles (1985), contributing to the drop out rates of girls in a subject such as math, is a failure on the part of girls to see math as relevant to their futures. Eccles maintains, "In this, girls reflect society's different aspirations for males and females. It should not be surprising to find that gifted girls are more likely than gifted boys to suppress

their ability rather than risk displeasing teachers and peers, especially in a society that teaches girls that it is important to please people" (p. 358).

Lita Linzer Schwarz (1980) argues that reconciling academic interests and education with the areas of excellence traditionally seen by society as sex role appropriate for women constitutes a major conflict for bright females. Schwarz contends that achieving girls are taught early to be invisible. In small, rural schools, however, even being invisible requires an effort.

In an interesting case study of Maine youth, ages 17-24, despite the fact that girls did better in high school and more of them went on to school, Donaldson (1984) reports this troubling conclusion: "In general, these young women felt that they had been unrealistically encouraged to pursue impractical educational ends by parents and the high school. Cutting back on these aspirations and shifting to more functional training has both allowed them to get to work sooner and to settle in 'Sawyer' without foregoing the type of job for which they were trained" (p. 8). Of the five girls that went on to school in Donaldson's group, only two finished.

Gifted females don't always receive the interest and encouragement from adults that Donaldson relates. In a study conducted in a small, rural Kansas district, Anderson and Kleinsasser (in press) surveyed inservice interests of elementary and secondary teachers. While 83% (n=42) of all teachers wanted to learn more about incorporating gifted education into the

regular classroom, less than 5% (representing two secondary teachers) were interested in learning more about the particular needs of gifted girls in educational settings.

OUT MIGRATION OF FEMALES FROM RURAL AREAS

A recurrent theme in the research literature relative to rural environments is the phenomenon of females leaving them (Amodeo et al. 1983; Clarenbach, 1977; Chu, 1980; Donaldson, 1984; Dunne, 1979; Hausmann, 1985). Bright females in rural areas appear to have three difficult choices: abandon goals and aspirations that are unattainable within the confines of rural life; adapt and downplay them; or migrate out to pursue them elsewhere.

Women appear more likely to migrate than the men in Donaldson's case study (1984): "Opportunities to leave appear to favor the departure and perhaps the developmental diversity of rural women" (p. 5). It is a case of survival of the culture, and its standards versus the individual and her (or his) potential. Heightening those decisions to stay or go are intensified sex-roles for rural girls and women.

PRESSURES TO MAINTAIN SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

Maintaining stricter sex-role stereotypes is a pressure gifted, rural females face more so than urban or suburban counterparts. Marrying early or feeling the imperative to marry does not seem to be as intense for urban females (Chu, 1980;

Dunne, 1979; Donaldson, 1984). In Donaldson's study, 75% of the females were married and 13% engaged. Marriage is "important to the sense of maturity within the community," writes Donaldson.

The literature supports the generalization that rural women tend to be family oriented, marry sooner, stay married, have more children, and perceive sex roles in very traditional ways. Donaldson (1984) reports that the unmarried Maine women in his study suffered under the "burden of spinsterhood".

Women are the mainstays of organizations that preserve community institutions (e.g., church, 4-H, the PTA, the Grange). They are, in essence, the keepers of the culture (Chu, 1980; Dunne, 1979). Despite the fact that rural farm and ranch women are often depicted as "partners", working along-side husbands and sons, Chu (1980) found them to be more traditional in sex-role ideology than non-farm rural women.

VALUES CONFLICT AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT OF ANDROGYNY

During the past decade, the issue of sex-role stereotyping has provided interesting discussion in both lay and scholarly journals. Some of the most provocative research revolves around the psychological construct termed androgyny (Bem, 1974). Current gifted education literature cites androgyny as a characteristic not only gifted and creative persons (particularly females), but of their parents, especially mothers (Glaszer & Dusek, 1985; Helson, 1976; Marsh & Myers, 1986; Overton & Meehan, 1982; Rotter & O'Connell, 1982; Scher, 1984; Tysse, 1982).

Some of the proponents of gifted education are also proponents of psychological androgyny, suggesting it to be the panacea for bright females who want to live beyond feminine-typed experiences. It, too, is a promise that requires careful study before receiving blanket approval.

According to its operational definition, androgynous persons exhibit more of both masculine and feminine traits than sex-typed persons. Males demonstrating androgynous behavior, for example, might be more nurturing and more sensitive than males exhibiting aggressive, emotion-less, independent behavior. Females who are androgynous might demonstrate independence and autonomy rather than dependence or "people pleasing" behaviors (Schwarz, 1980; Weiner and Robinson, 1983).

In short, the construct suggests that an androgynous person, whether female or male, is a superior human. She or he is more flexible and adaptable, enjoys better psychological health, has higher self esteem, is more tolerant of ambiguity, and is better adjusted (Taylor & Hall, 1982). The person's repertoire of possible behaviors is simply larger since she or he is psychologically more complex. It is important to note, however, that psychological health is typically defined in masculine terms in American society. Therefore, as long as success has a masculine or instrumental connotation, both males and females who exemplify those traits will be successful and, by definition, be psychologically healthy.

Androgyny research presents an interesting agenda for

cognitive psychologists as well. Cognitive development seems to correlate with sex role development, according to Tysse (1982). More cognitively advanced children recognize that one sex can maintain both feminine and masculine characteristics. Tysse maintains that cognitive development is also related to vocational perception. Therefore, it is understandable that proponents of gifted education, particularly advocates of female achievement, would find in androgyny a seemingly perfect solution to sex-role stereotyping that limits if not forces choices for persons of both genders.

For rural girls, however, androgyny really means that they must be facile in demonstrating sex-role specific tasks already pronounced in rural cultures both in and out of academic settings, as well as exemplify what is most prized about being masculine: to be competitive, ambitious, individualistic, self-sufficient, and willing to lead. It begs the question, are we encouraging females to be androgynous or are we encouraging them to be masculine?

Encouraging androgyny in females and males as well as promoting it in parenting styles poses several moral and ethical considerations. If androgyny is touted as a solution, particularly for bright females, are we participating in the perpetuation of societal condition that needlessly pressures females while continuing to over-value instrumentality and/or masculinity? If we don't, are we handicapping females who choose, for whatever reason, to pursue male-dominated professions?

SELF ESTEEM OF SCHOOL AGE FEMALES AND RURAL FEMALES

In general, comparisons of adolescent self-esteem and sex role perceptions with respect to academic achievement favor boys (Robison-Awana, Kehle, Jenson, 1986). Studies by Fox (1976) and Gallagher (1967) as discussed by Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis (1986) also support lesser confidence levels of girls in their ability. This suggests that gifted girls might feel less secure, attributing failure to lack of ability.

Eccles (1985) writes that girls, especially high ability attribute acquired skill, diligence, and efforts as more causes of math success than do boys of equal attainment. Boys rate natural talent as a more important cause of their math success. Also, gifted girls are more likely than gifted boys to underrate their talents, thereby passively participating in their own invisibility.

Eleanor E. Maccoby, a social development scholar, cites a series of studies completed by Dweck and colleagues on failure attribution (1980). Typically, females are more likely to experience learned helplessness than males. If males fail to succeed, they attribute it to a lack of effort--they did not work enough. Females attribute failure to a lack of ability. The contribution of teachers to this socialization is important to consider:

When boys turn in poor work, teachers are likely to scold them for lack of effort, for not paying attention, for sloppiness. The message is: "If you would only stop fooling around and get down to work, you could do very well." Teachers seem to make the assumption that girls are already trying as hard as they can. When a girl makes a

mistake, the feedback from the teacher is "You didn't get it right even though you tried," and the implication is that the girl can't get it right--that she lacks ability (pp. 288-289).

While research findings are not conclusive, there is some indication that the self esteem of rural females is less than that of urban females and of rural males. Schlichter, 1981, characterizes rural youth as having generally lower self esteem, lower levels of aspirations, and frustrated with instructional programs that are not relevant to students' interests and environment.

In a study of Georgia fifth and sixth graders representing a range of achievement, ability, socio-economic-status, and race, Berryman and others (1983) sampled students from three elementary schools in a rural county. Females had significantly lower self concepts than males in both the fifth and sixth grades as defined by the Piers-Harris measure of self esteem. Girls had significantly lower cluster scores on physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction.

In another study, Peterson et al. (1978) administered the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire to 127 randomly selected high school seniors of both sexes in a middle class, midwestern, rural community in an economically depressed area. Adolescent girls had a significantly poorer image than boys while younger girls had poorer images than older girls. Rural girls of all ages had a more negative self image than urban girls. The authors contend that the nature of the community is an important variable along

with sex and age with respect to self concept: "Rural family atmosphere, often devoid of hope, accomplishment, and pride could easily cause low self esteem....realistic hopes for a satisfying and fulfilling future are not within reach" (p. 15). Interestingly, the writers draw an analogy between the lack of hope rural children face and that of inner city youth.

Clearly, gifted education specialists as well as parents and general educators must understand, monitor, and assess the varying levels of self esteem that bright, rural females demonstrate. It would also suggest an important area of concern for guidance counselors.

THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

The issues presented thus far--selecting appropriate career goals, addressing the issue of self esteem, dealing with male typed sex-roles, female typed sex-roles, androgyny--suggest that gifted girls might benefit from the intervention of school counselors.

Data relative to counselors and the gifted, whether female or female and rural, are sparse. According to a 1977 report by the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, seeking assistance from a guidance counselor might thwart progress for females. According to these figures, now ten years old, counselors were predominantly white and male and biased against women's attainments. This socialization and sex-role stereotyping leads to qualitative and quantitative differences in

self-concept between men and women. Counselors also held negative expectations for females and for minorities. Additionally, and probably most importantly, the theoretical underpinnings of counselors, tests, surveys, and career materials were sex biased. Males were depicted as active, females as passive. Finally, male and female counselors were found to be biased against women entering male fields.

In a more recent study, but consistent with the 1977 data, Eccles (1985) reports that in general, counselors do not encourage either girls or boys who want to pursue non-traditional fields. Counselors actively discouraged accelerated math for girls (80% of the time) as opposed to discouraging males (9% of the time).

This is an important finding. Eccles writes: "Given the omnipresence of gender role prescriptions regarding appropriate life choices for females. Parents, teachers, and counselors must actively encourage gifted girls to develop non-traditional roles" (p. 291). Despite yet another generalized admonition, especially when compared to Donaldson's findings that girls are encouraged to achieve unrealistic goals it is important for gifted females, parents, and other educators to recognize that some guidance counselors seem to be poor sources of encouragement. Older girls serving as mentors seem to provide better sources for younger females interested in math and physical science careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Eccles (1985), in a provocative discussion analyzing value issues and career choices of bright females, the right question probably isn't even being asked. Rather than wondering why gifted females aren't like gifted males (in as much math, science, computer-related study), Eccles asks: Why do bright females choose what they do? Why don't they take math courses? Why do they choose not to participate in male-dominated professions, not to compete? These questions are especially pertinent in the analysis of bright, rural females who clearly have potential but opt for seemingly lesser academic goals.

Gender roles help define what one should do with one's life to be successful in a particular role. Out of a complex set of both psychological and sociological forces, gender role differences result in 1) the internalization of those roles; 2) the assessment by individuals of which jobs and roles are realistically available; and 3) both the overt and subtle forms of discrimination operating in educational and occupational institutions.

Eccles points out that another way of defining the value of a task for females or males is through expense: the cost of anticipated anxiety, the fear of failure, the loss of time and energy for other activities, especially with respect to long term activities. Four areas of decision-making that guide achievement attainment might include the following:

- 1) one's expectations for success;

- 2) the relation of perceived options to both short and long range goals and one's self identity and basic psychological needs;
- 3) the individual's gender role schema;
- 4) the potential cost of investing time in one activity rather than another.

A key to any successful educational delivery model for bright females in geographically isolated areas hinges on these four decisions. Most importantly, for any rural educator or program planner is a respect for rural values and the necessities of rural life.

The following specific recommendations are warranted based on the research literature:

1. Verbal and non-verbal messages of all school personnel, should be monitored. Administrators observing classrooms, teaching styles, and learners' actions, should be attuned to question asking strategies of teachers. Do teachers respond differently to females than they do to males? Are females coddled and males challenged to "figure it out on your own"? Supervisors can help teachers become aware of their own biases and behaviors.

Inservice materials are available from the National Education Association, book companies, plus various institutes promoting equity issues that school personnel might view in group or individual format. Administrators should neither tolerate nor support inappropriate and potentially illegal practices.

Additionally, office personnel, custodians, coaches, and bus drivers should know that they, too, are significant role models for all students.

2. Competitive activities, particularly extra-curricular activities relating to time-dated sports should be down-played. Life-time sports such as bowling, tennis, swimming, biking, hiking might be more in the long-term interests of students as well as communities.

The long-term effects of gifted education programming options such as Olympics of the Mind, Future Problem Solving, and winner-take-all science fairs or academic challenges are not known. If offered as options, they should be monitored and promoted with caution.

3. Pre and inservice activities of school staff characterized as blanket or generic presentations might be of limited value. More realistic and helpful to teachers (and ultimately students) is one-on-one assistance in curriculum development for gifted students, particularly females.

4. Teachers and administrators should monitor various notices sent home with children. Are both fathers and mothers invited to homeroom activities? Can those activities be scheduled so both parents might attend? Are pairs of parents or fathers encouraged to assist elementary teachers in traveling to out-of-school events or are "room mothers" scheduled to serve? Could senior citizens of the community who reflect not only traditional, but also non-traditional life styles assist?

5. Teachers should avoid programming options for gifted girls that isolate them or require them to work strictly on an independent basis. Instead, activities for pairs of students or small groups should be planned. There is a small body research (Fox, 1977; Kravatz, 1984) indicating that all-female classes in math and science promote higher achievement in females, especially if the teacher is a female. Are women from the community or nearby businesses invited to serve as models or mentors to females interested in male dominated fields? This might be especially important if there are no female teachers to serve as models. Fox and Kravatz suggest that the confidence levels of females are boosted in single gender settings. Are there opportunities for science or math clubs, instead of competitions?

6. Do teaching and learning materials reflect realistic, relevant roles for both men and women? Are there opportunities for female classroom speakers and guests to model traditional and non-traditional roles, occupations, and professions?

Teachers and administrators should monitor the type of presentation and the gender of the presenter. Is there a stereotypic representation of classroom visitors: powerful, male authority figures such as firemen, policemen, bankers, lawyers, and doctors? Do nurturing females share travelogues and slide shows?

7. Are counselors sensitive not only to the values of rural life but also to the ambiguities inherent in advanced

educational opportunities for females and males? Do guidance counselors offer unbiased information promoting realistic but equitable career choices for females and males? Are materials and test instruments up-to-date and unbiased?

8. Lastly, are the strengths rather than weaknesses that characterize rural females and males highlighted? Rural youth tend to be logical thinkers and problem solvers. They become frustrated when formal education is not relevant to real-world needs (Schlichter, 1981). They are sensitive to injustice and interested in people and their activities rather than things. Are there opportunities to enhance and further develop the astute social intelligence of rural youth and their heightened responsibility for the community?

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